Notebook 1, pt. 2.

W. Innes

THE UNION BANK OF CANADA

Pioneers at Grande Prairie

The Romance of our Penetration into the Peace River Country--by W.L. Thorp.

The passer-by, to whom the imposing facades of Head Offices are a daily sight, does not always ponder on the chronicle of the men who have gone into the wilderness to make possible the majesty of the city banking-house.

With this in mind, there follows the story of W. Innes of Grande Prairie, who in October, 1911, was delegated to go into the Peace River country to open the branch of which he is still manager.

When Mr. Innes received his orders, he was unable to locate his destination on the map. However, his jumping-off place was Edmonton, for which he started with the zeal of an apostle into the Unknown. Here information was obtained regarding the journey north. There was a choice of two routes. One was the summer trail which included a trip by boat up the Little Slave River, and across Lesser Slave Lake. The other was the winter route by rail to Edson, and thence northwards by trail through bush and muskeg.

CHOOSING THE ROUTE

It was between seasons. Only a weather prophet could predict the easier road for November may contain the promise of January or July. If the lake froze, the summer trail was impossible; if the muskegs did not freeze, the winter trail was equally out of the question. Mr. Innes was not a weather prophet, but the winter route was shorter

so he chose it.

A full outfit for the journey was procured in Edmonton. An assistant--Mr. F.M. Langair--joined the prospective manager here, and the travellers left the city at six o'clock one morning, travelling by rail to Edson, which was reached at midday. Coincidently with arrival in Edson, the weather, which had hitherto been mild, decided to change. The wind veered into the north-east, and soon developed into a blizzard. Nevertheless, a start was made without delay, and twenty miles covered by waggon that afternoon. A Frenchman's cabin was reached at nightfall. Here the little party had their evening meal, smoked, rolled themselves up in their blankets, and went to sleep on the floor.

They set out next morning at dawn. There had been frost in the night, and the muskegs were hard enough to carry horses and waggon. All morning was a long pull up what had been aptly enough named Scotsman's Hill; at noon, the summit and a blinding blizzard. The party now donned furs and moccasins, for October had declared herself. Scotsman's Hill is 4600 feet high, and the other side is called Break Neck Hill. The angle is 45 degrees. So the waggon wheels were locked, and the horses sat on their haunches, and the travellers tobogganed half a mile for the honor of the Bank. From here the trail led through a canyon to the Athabaska River. There was a stopping house on the river bank, and this was reached late the second night.

HALTED BY ICE JAM

It had been intended to make a crossing the following morning by a raft used for the purpose, but the water receded during the night, leaving this contrivance high and dry. The day was spent in unsuccessful efforts to dislodge it. The river continued to get lower, and it was clear that an ice-jam had formed further up and was damming the stream. Towards evening two riders, their horses pack-laden, crossed at the ford. One of them was upset by a racing floe, but clung gamely to the horn of his saddle and reached the shore. Night came. While the travellers slept, the ice-jam broke and a new one formed at the ford. The next evening this was solid enough to bear the weight of the waggon, and on the morning of the succeeding day--the fifth of the journey--a crossing was made.

At noon another river, the Baptiste, was reached. Forgetting the Athabaska, the party treated it with a confidence to which it did not respond. Ice was in part of the blankets for a week. The travellers were becoming broken to mischances. It was well, for they had done with human habitation for a week.

SEVERITY OF WINTER

The thermometer went far below zero. By day, turns were taken at driving the horses, those not engaged running in front or behind to keep up circulation. At night, camp was pitched in the woods. A fire was built, and a brake of boughs set up to prevent the wilderness being unnecessarily warmed. Bacon and beans were fried, and

lumps of bread broken off with the axe. Spoons and forks were useless. They froze in transit, and had to be detached from the lip. Supper over, the travellers drew lots as to whom should sleep in the middle, and huddled close to the fire in their blankets. So a week passed.

On the seventh day after the passage of the rivers, the trading post of the Hudson's Bay Company at Sturgeon Lake was reached. The party had been out of food for two days, with the exception of what game they were able to shoot. They laid in a fresh stock of provisions, and were further aided by milder weather. Three days after leaving Sturgeon Lake, they arrived in the Peace River district.

THE PIONEER SETTLEMENT

The approaching end of the journey stimulated Mr. Innes, who rode on ahead of the party for the last thirty miles. He passed three cabins on his way, one of which was deserted. There was no sign of cultivation. Prosperous homesteads cover the trail he followed that day. When he came to Grande Prairie at nightfall, he saw a few rough shacks. The Land Office and Post Office were the only places of business.

The bank was allowed space in the Post Office, which measured six feet by twelve. This was large enough except when the mail came in; and the mail was sometimes five weeks late. It was only possible to bring thirty pounds of baggage on the trail. This included personal effects--blankets were an extra--so only three small books and a few pads of blank forms were taken as Bank stationery. Cash was brought, and kept in a suitcase for the first six

months. Business was quite that winter, for prospective settlers did not come in until February and March. They were a hardy breed, many of whom had followed trails as stern and frozen as that which led to Grande Prairie.

SHORTAGE OF SUPPLIES

Supplies could only be hauled in winter on account of the muskegs and rivers. When Mr. Innes came to Grande Prairie all food had been exhausted except what could be grown locally. This consisted chiefly of potatoes, beef, and moose meat. The Selkirk Trading Company arrived to open business a few days before Christmas. They found it unnecessary to unload their sleighs, for everything was purchased off them within a few minutes.

BANK PIONEERING

The first months the Bank staff slept on the floor. A Bank building was erected in May 1912, for which equipment and stationery had been ordered during the winter. The freight rate from Edson to Grande Prairie was high, and a safe was brought up at a cost of $300.

Today Grande Prairie is the centre of a large and prosperous community, to whom four banks render service. The customer who sat on a soapbox in the diminutive post-office, may now disclose his financial needs in camera. Railroad, telegraph, and telephone have dissipated the isolation of Grande Prairie. The trail is no more. Its hardships remain only in the memory of those who suffered and endured.

OPENING UNION BANK BRANCH AT CARBON

In December, 1909, we were instructed to open a branch at Three Hills.

The forty mile drive from Didsbury to Three Hills was mad made with a team of horses and open democrat. With a foot of snow on the ground and blizzardy cold weather the progress was slow. Trail had to be broken practically all the way and drifts were heavy.

The railway had been surveyed and the townsite located. No construction work had started. Whether or not the townsite had been surveyed we could not tell at this late date but survey stakes would not be in evidence on account of the depth of the snow.

At or near the townsite was one house and outbuildings where we could have a meal but no bed.

We made what arrangements we could to have a building erected suitable to commence banking in, then proceeded to Carbon about twenty miles south east of Three Hills.

Homesteaders were encroaching on Carbon from the west but to the east and south it was all ranching country.

Carbon was the trading point for the ranchers and took in considerable territory including Greentree's Crossing, Fox Coulee and Hind Ranch now named Drumheller, Munson and Rosebud respectively.

There was a very comfortable hotel with heat in every room which was quite unusual in country hotels in those days. They had also an excellent chef and up-to-date bar. Besides the hotel there was a lumber yard, three stores, livery barn and blacksmith shop.

We opened a branch there and remained in charge. The accountant at Didsbury went to Three Hills and opened the branch there early in 1910.

In Carbon there was only one married couple. All the others lived at the hotel.

The people were of the real pioneer type and very colourful. A very interesting biography could be written of many of the ranchers and ranch hands. There were few dull moments, and, at the round up time and after beef was delivered the life was carefree, happy and exhilarating.

The nearest railway points were Crossfield sixty miles to the west and Strathmore fifty miles south. When anyone wanted to go to Calgary they drove eighty miles south west. The mail came in once a week, by stage.

An addition had to be built to the hotel so we arranged to have the bank quarters on the ground floor. In the meantime we started business in a small shack. The space was too small for the safe so we had it placed outside the back door and built a lumber shelter over and around it. The safe door when opened swung into the bank.

The branch at Carbon proved very successful and living was very enjoyable. There were very few small loans. The ranchers could not wait two or three weeks to have the loan authorized by head office so all loans were made on the spot and confirmation of them asked for later.

Safe moving was always the bane of pioneer banking as so few people had the equipment or experience necessary. The customary charge for moving was ten dollars. Only one person was equipped for moving the safe to the new

office and for that reason he insisted on charging fifteen dollars. He was advised it was going to be moved for the usual price and his services would not be required.

We had heard of barn raising bees in Eastern Canada and decided to adopt that method.

Saturday afternoon was chosen as an appropriate time when the boys would be in for relaxation. Crow bars, plank and rope were borrowed and about five or six refreshment times laid out. There were three right angle turns to be made and a hoist of three steps on to the hotel verandah. We confided our modus operandi to one of the business men who became our enthusiastic assistant.

We decided the first drink time would be when we had the safe on the skids. By then we had three spectators and they were invited in. Teddy the bar tender was asked to keep account of the drinks. We had now five workers. The next drink times were at the three right angle turns and by the time we reached the steps we had enough man power, with the aid of a 2" rope to get over the big hazard and on to the verandah.

It was with considerable apprehension we asked Teddy for our bill on Monday morning. He had been too busy to keep account as it had been the most profitable day he had experienced and asked if ten dollars would be too much. We were quite relieved and issued an official cheque to him for ten dollars for safe moving.

The bank assistant was the only male in those parts who did not drink, smoke or frequent the pool room. He walked out the school marm and wore the only Christie

stiff hat in that land of Stetsons.

Along about second drink time he appeared on the scene and ordered a temperance drink. The nearest to his requirements was port wine which he drank by the tumbler full. Well, anyway, to make a long story short, the safe moving cost him sixteen dollars - twelve dollars for a new pool table cloth and four dollars for a new hat.

We shall just take space enough to make mention of one of the many characters - Teddy the bar tender who was our closest neighbour. He was from a good English family; went to the South African war as a youngster; after the war joined the police investigation department; worked in with safe blowing gangs and diamond thieves and generally distinguished himself in detective work. Eventually the gangsters caught up with him and he came to Western Canada to recuperate.

His father staked him to a ranch and a monthly remittance. Life was too slow for him on the ranch after the exciting life he had led. The remittance was only sufficient for him to remain on the customers side of the bar for three days each month so he crossed over to the other side. A few years later he was chief detective in one of our western cities.

The new office in the hotel building was spacious, bright and attractive with two large bedrooms behind for the staff. The only drawback was having only one ply of lumber between the bank and the bar. Behind the bedrooms was the snake room and frequently at night that partition seemed to be thin.

Usually the noise in the bar was moderate until after the bank closed but when there was a brought forward from the night before it was embarrassing when a lady or a man of the cloth happend to pay us a visit. We had a signal for "Silence" and one for "All clear". Often when given the order for silence it was not obeyed. Teddy procured a fence post and shaped it to an enormous club which he kept at hand. With his sleeves rolled up displaying magnificent bicepts he was an impressive figure holding the club over an offender's head. When we heard his ultimatum "One other word and down you go", we could relax and proceed with our business.

Teddy had to visit Gleichen sixty miles to the south east from Carbon. We rode up to a high spot where we could see the butes forty miles south. The instructions as to the different forks of the trail to follow were a bit puzzling to him and he did not like the idea of only coming in sight of three ranches on the journey. He meditated for a short space then remarked "I see now why St. Paul sent his epistle to the Gleichens instead of riding over to see them. I am going to take the stage to the railway and go around by train."

When we left Carbon in October 1911 to open branches in the Peace River District grading on the railway from Calgary to Drumheller had been completed. The grading was also completed on the railway from Calgary to Edmonton via Three Hills(had also been completed?). This cut the territory for banking down to a small area.

Before leaving Carbon we had an office erected to

start business in at Swalwell about eight miles north west of Carbon.

Carbon branch was closed a short time after the commencement of the last war.

SPIRIT RIVER BRANCH, SEPT. 15, 1915.

In 1912 Peace River Crossing and Dunvegan townsite lots were on the market. Real Estate offices throughout Western Canada displayed advertising matter showing these points as up-to-date cities with street cars, etc. This must have influenced the Head Office officials of the Bank for instructions came through to open at both places.

Peace River is about 150 miles from Grande Prairie and Dunvegan about half way. Both places are on the river level while the farming land is 1000 ft. higher.

After a scouting trip it was concluded that the settlers would not drive down the dangerous trails to the river if they could do business up on the prairie.

Bear Lake - now named Berwyn - was recommended instead of Peace River Crossing and Spirit River instead of Dunvegan. To avoid the deep ravines leading to the river an East to West railway would have to keep South of the Dunvegan townsite eight or ten miles and there did not appear to be any inducement for a railway to cross at that point.

In 1912 Dunvegan had a good Hudson Bay trading post and a small log church. Both are closed and the place is deserted except for the ferry attendants. For 125 years previous to that, when rivers were the trading arteries,

it was a very important point for the fur trading business.

Peace River Crossing fared much better for the only reason that, 15 years later, a railway was built across the river at that point.

Mr. W.G. Hart, accountant at Grande Prairie, was appointed manager at Spirit River in September, 1915.

Supplies for the new branch had been shipped over the Edson Trail the previous winter. These had to be freighted upwards of 50 miles to Spirit River, 25 of which were steep bush trails winding over the Burnt Hills and Saddle Mountains.

Teamsters were not obtainable so a good wagon and the heaviest team possible were procured and the outgoing journey completed in two days.

The Grand Trunk and the Canadian Northern Railways from Edmonton to Prince Rupert and Vancouver were completed about the time the Edmonton, Dunvegan and B.C. Ry. commenced to build from Edmonton to the Peace River District.

All the gamblers, bootleggers, tinhorns and other rif-raf from the former railways were at the head of construction on the latter and many of them had reached Spirit River.

Three years previous to this time Mr. Hart had filed on a homestead at Spirit River. We were dressed as teamsters and when any one enquired our business we would answer that we were locating Mr. Hart on his homestead.

We had two good rea ons for this. There was little

protection for the cash and there were three likely places to open the branch at, Englishe's, Revillions' and the Hudson Bay Trading Posts, all about a mile apart, each of them would demand that we open at his place of business.

We opened at Revillions' Trading Post which was central. There we were given a compartment in the safe and a corner in the store to start business in. As usual chicken wire was used for the cash cage.

The settlers were pleasantly surprised to find that a bank had opened and celebrated the occasion.

Adjoining Revillions was quite a large tent town with restaurants gambling places, etc. Next morning in one of those restaurants, as we were about to start for home, it was discovered, on the advice of an old time construction cook, that a bowl of hot coffee containing sliced raw onions was good for one when breakfast was not agreeable.

The Hudson's Bay factor asked us to take 700 lbs. of oranges as far as Grande Prairie for their post at Lake Saskatoon. As there was no charge we felt entitled to help ourselves. They were very much appreciated as those were the first to be shipped into that part and we had not tasted an orange for four years.

Fresh fruit could not be taken in over the winter trails on account of the frost nor over the summer trail as it would be shaken to a pulp. This had been shipped to the end of steel 60 miles east of Spirit River.

On the return journey we had lunch and fed the horses at Dunc Cameron's Stopping Place on the Burnt River. When we were pulling out from there a swarthy fellow emerged from the bush and asked if he could put his pack in the wagon and tie the pack horse behind. He was very tired and would like to lie down in the wagon.

Soon his conscience appeared to trouble him and he admitted that the police had been after him for three days and nights. The pack consisted of liquor. He produced a roll of money which he said was sufficient to pay the fine if he were caught.

The occasional drinks produced during the afternoon were very acceptable for the trail was wet, steep in many places and quite trying on account of the horses slipping and stumbling around.

That night we camped together at a small stream close to the summit of Burnt Mountain. At noon the next day we arrived at a slough about half a mile east of the present town of Sexsmith and about fourteen miles north of Grande Prairie. Our friend left us there and said he would proceed on this journey after dark.

Our fallfair at Grande Prairie was held the following day. An enthusiastic friend met us as we were approaching the fair grounds and announced that a bootlegger had started in business. Any new enterprise is a cause for elation in a pioneer town.

We were taken in to the bush to be introduced to the new business man. He was quite surprised to find the banker was the teamster of the two previous days. This

turned out to be the notorious Sad Sam who played many parts in the North in the years to follow.

Sam opened his emporium in a back alley and in a short time had two bar-tenders steadily employed. Any one in need Sam would help. Practically all his profits went to charity.

Mrs. Forbes, dear to everyone, opened the first hospital in a tent and slaved there, winter and summer, until help came. She was as a mother to all of us. After we left her grave-side Sam came out of hiding in the bush, with a shovel, and proceeded to help the grave digger. This was his way of paying last respects to the Florence Nightingale of the North.

The call came for production during the last war. Sam gave up his lucrative business. Help was hard to get so Sam slaved away almost day and night, farming 400 acres. He had the 400 acres in oats the year oats were minus $25. per carload. The car of oats would be shipped to Edmonton. The railway company collected the proceeds and the shipper was tendered a bill for $25. for the balance of freight owing. Like a great many others Sam was forced to give up farming.

In June 1918, six men - five of them customers of the bank - were murdered within a few miles of Grande Prairie, Shorty and Slim were suspects and the posse was on their heels.

Superintendent (Blackjack) McDonell of the Mounties arrived to take charge of operations. Bobby Baird and A.F.S. Tatum, both well-known to Union Bankers, arrived

on an unofficial visit about the same time. They were old friends of Blackjack. We were delegated to drive Blackjack and the two mentioned accompanied us.

After dark one night we were proceeding to the scene of operations when we met the police car returning with the prisoners. Slim was wounded and was being taken to the hospital. We followed. At the hospital Blackjack asked the sargent "Who shot this man?" "Sad Sam" was the reply. The next question was "How did you manage to get across the flooded Wapiti River?" Again, "Sad Sam" was the reply.

It transpired that Shorty was captured in camp. Slim was hunting for food and was expected to return down the bush trail soon. The posse lay concealed with their rifles ready. When Slim was at close quarters, one of the policemen exposed himself and called on him to surrender. Slim jumped behind a tree with only his elbow and rifle showing and aimed at the policeman. Instantly Sad Sam shot him through the elbow, and, it is quite possible, through his quick action, he saved the policeman's life.

When Sam was carrying on a conversation with anyone he had a peculiar nervous habit of reaching over his left shoulder and picking imaginary haris or something off it. As he has been dead for a long time, it may now be safely revealed, that he was wearing a bullet there received while a posse, with blood hounds, was on his trail.